Kay E. Brown Comments for the Record

April 5, 2011 Hearing

Subcommittee on Human Resources

Committee on Ways and Means

Q: Chairman Davis asked witnesses at the hearing to submit comments for the record to address a comment and question from Representative Paulsen.   Rep. Paulsen commented that we would not likely have all of these programs if we were starting from scratch and asked about the best path forward, given where we are now.

A: As we know, the patchwork of programs that I described in my testimony was not specifically designed this way but instead evolved over time to meet new needs or, as Chairman Davis noted, to work around a problem in an existing program. As a result, and because of the wide array of services provided to meet individuals' and families' needs, it is not surprising to see various entities involved, with some fragmentation of administration, some overlap in populations served, and some duplication of services offered. In some instances, these features may be warranted, for example, when certain populations have a specific need for specialized services that the existing programs as structured cannot meet. In addition, the exact dollar savings that would accrue from changes are very difficult to calculate, in part because so many of these programs are operated at the state level and have varied administrative structures. However, I agree that we need to do more to identify and minimize the extent of fragmentation, overlap, and duplication to improve program administration.

In my testimony, I identified three approaches to reducing inefficiencies in human services program. I also highlighted the need to work collaboratively with other entities and to move cautiously. Millions of individuals and families rely on this complex system and there are no quick and easy solutions to simplify and improve this system. I have repeated these approaches here with some examples under each.

1. Simplifying policies and processes--Among related programs, look for ways to align definitions, performance standards, and reporting and verification requirements in law or in federal agency regulations for your programs and for related programs under the jurisdiction of other committees. This could occur during reauthorizations or budget deliberations. Many believe that simplifying the administrative requirements for managing program funds would ease states' administrative workload and reduce administrative spending.

2.   Facilitating technology enhancements--At this Subcommittee's March 11, 2011, hearing on data sharing, Chairman Davis said in his opening statement that it will take working with other committees to increase data sharing among programs to improve program efficiency and save costs. Collaborative efforts like that will be important to making progress. The Subcommittee may also want to pay attention to federal rules and practices for overseeing and facilitating technology innovations that occur across programs in the states. For example, states have told us in the past that it is difficult to get federal approval for technologies that cut across multiple programs.

3. Fostering state innovation and evaluation for evidence-based decisionmaking--Look for ways to build in evaluations and consider rigorous studies of programs' effectiveness and efficiencies when reauthorizing programs and making budgetary decisions. Related to this, the Partnership Fund for Program Integrity Innovation project--noted in my testimony--that brings together federal agencies and state program administrators to identify, test, and evaluate ideas for improving federal assistance programs warrants attention as it moves forward.

Also related to program evaluation and performance, in January 2011, the President signed the GPRA Modernization Act of 2010, updating the almost two-decades-old Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA). Implementing provisions of the new act--such as its emphasis on establishing outcome-oriented goals covering a limited number of crosscutting policy areas--could play an important role in clarifying desired outcomes, addressing program

performance spanning multiple organizations, and facilitating future actions to reduce unnecessary duplication, overlap, and fragmentation. Continued oversight by Congress will be critical to ensuring that unnecessary duplication, overlap, and fragmentation are addressed.

Recently, the Comptroller General, in testifying on GAO's governmentwide work on potential duplication, overlap, and fragmentation among federal programs and activities, said that careful, thoughtful actions will be needed to address many of the issues raised by our work. These are difficult issues to address because they may require agencies and Congress to re-examine within and across various mission areas the fundamental structure, operation, funding, and performance of a number of long-standing federal programs or activities with entrenched constituencies. As for so much of government, this applies in the area of human services programs designed to help people in need.